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ABSTRACT

The effects of a conflict resolution program on school climate, student self-image, and the use of conflict resolution skills were studied in urban schools in Canada. Benefits and limitations of conflict resolution in comparison with other types of violence prevention programs and methods of evaluating violence prevention programs were also studied. The context was grade-5 classrooms of 3 French and 4 English elementary schools in 2 urban areas of a large Canadian city, for a total of 140 students and their teachers. The evaluation design was based on the Key Features Model of J. S. Renzulli (1975) using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design. Data sources included student and teacher questionnaires and structured interviews with students and teachers. The conflict resolution program, which featured accepting and respecting difference and skills for self-control and communication, was delivered over 10 weeks. Observations supported the positive effects of the program on school climate. Students reported increased self-confidence and an increase in the use of skills specific to conflict resolution. Teachers reported a decrease in interference with teaching, but the value perceived by teachers for the program did not change with the intervention. Implications for future evaluations of violence prevention programs are discussed. (Contains 5 tables and 39 references.) (SLD)

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Finding Evidence To Support Violence Prevention Programs

Paper Presentation on Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention

Session 5.11

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Abstract

Schools and communities throughout Canada struggle to address an increasing concern about violence among children and youth . The struggle involves selecting strategies that will be effective in making schools conducive to learning and in reducing violence. Equipping decision makers with information about the options available to them and providing them with empirical evidence of program effectiveness are valuable contributions that educational researchers and evaluators can make toward reducing violence in our society.

The specific purpose of this study was to (a) determine the effects of a conflict resolution program on the school climate, the students' self image, the use of conflict resolution skills, and the social validity of the program, (b) identify the benefits and limitations of conflict resolution in comparison with other violence prevention programs, and (c) explore methods of evaluation for violence prevention programs. The focus of this study was the evaluation of a conflict resolution pilot project organized by four community service organizations and funded by provincial and federal government agencies. The context of the study was grade five classrooms of three French and four English elementary schools in two urban areas of a large Canadian city. The participants of the study included students (140), home-room teachers, and other school teachers with responsibility for the participating classrooms.

The evaluation design was based on the Key Features Model of Renzulli (Renzulli, 1975). Data collection procedures used a quasi-experimental pre-post test control group design. The collection of data with multiple instruments from several sources permitted quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Between methods triangulation enabled the use of strong points from each type of data, cross checking of data, and collection of information that was only available through particular techniques.

Finding Evidence To Support Violence Prevention Programs

Schools and communities throughout Canada struggle to address an increasing concern about violence among children and youth (Day, Golench, MacDougall, & Beals-Gonzalez, 1995; Gabor, 1995). The struggle involves selecting strategies that will be effective in making schools conducive to learning and in reducing violence. Responsible organizations are ill equipped to make these selections because of a lack of understanding about the array of programs and confusing statistics about violence and the effectiveness of prevention initiatives. Equipping decision makers with information about the options available to them and providing them with empirical evidence of program effectiveness are valuable contributions that educational researchers and evaluators can make toward reducing violence in our society.

There are no clear trends about either the extent of the violence in schools or the effectiveness of current intervention strategies used in Canada and in the United States. Some studies report an increase in school violence (Federation, 1994; Roher, 1993; Ryan, Matthews, & Banner, 1993) while others report a decline (Cusson, 1990; Fitspatrick, 1994; Rogers, 1993; West, 1993). Educational evaluators at this time report uncertainty about the effectiveness of programs designed to deal with the violence (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Lam, 1989; Webster, 1993; Wilson-Brewer, Cohen, O'Donnell, & Goodman, 1991). Some of this uncertainty arises because of the paucity of evaluations studies and the methodological weakness in the designs (Flannery, 1996; Levesque, 1996). In a survey of 210 Canadian school boards, Day (1995) found systematic program evaluation was the exception. Only 4.3% submitted a completed evaluation of a program currently in use.

Apart from the need to have valid and reliable data on the effectiveness of programs, policy makers, funding councils, health and education services, and the general public need

assurances of the effectiveness of programs that are in place. Evaluation of conflict-resolution and violence-prevention programs can provide data for the service providers and consumers by determining whether goals are being accomplished and efforts are worthwhile

Purpose

The specific purpose of this study was to (a) determine the effects of a conflict resolution program on the school climate, the students' self image, the use of conflict resolution skills, and the social validity of the program, (b) identify the benefits and limitations of conflict resolution in comparison with other violence prevention programs, and (c) explore methods of evaluation for violence prevention programs.

Theoretical Framework

Two sets of theories formed the basis of this study. The first set included the literature on violence (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Eron, 1994; Goldstein, 1994; Heusmann, 1994), conflict resolution (Bodine, Crawford, & Schrumpf, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Katz & Lawyer, 1993), and violence prevention (Busby, 1996; Day et al., 1995; Goldstein & Glick, 1994; Henggeler, Melton, Smith, Schoenwald, & Hanley, 1993). Understanding the causes of violence is crucial to determining appropriate solutions (Day et al., 1995; Landen, 1992). The solution goals provide a basis for subsequent evaluation. The second set of theories was drawn from the evaluation literature (Creswell, 1994; King, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987; Patton, 1990; Popham, 1993) and more specifically the evaluation of violence prevention and conflict resolution programs (Day et al., 1995; Gabor, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Lam, 1989; Webster, 1993; Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991).

Method

The methods used in this study were organized around (a) determining the effects of the conflict resolution program, and (b) comparing the program with other violence prevention programs. The methods and results will be discussed in that order.

Context

The focus of this study was the evaluation of a conflict resolution pilot project organized by four community service organizations and funded by provincial and federal government agencies. The project was in the second of a three year funding cycle and the study sought to determine the value of the program and to assist decision makers in the final year as to whether a request for future funding was justified. The project managers were not interested in finding positive evidence, rather wanted to truly know if the program was working and what direction it should take.

The context of the study was grade five classrooms of three French and four English elementary schools in two urban areas of a large Canadian city. The participants of the study included students, home-room teachers, and other school teachers with responsibility for the participating classrooms. In all 140 students were involved. Eighty students in four classrooms comprised the program group and sixty- students in three classrooms comprised the control group. The control schools were matched and selected for similar socioeconomic, multicultural, and academic characteristics.

Two groups of teachers who participated in the study were selected to complete two questionnaires. The first group included the teachers with primary teaching responsibility for classrooms participating in the study. Seven home-room teachers with experience ranging from

12 to 28 years, with the mean being 17 years, participated. Thirty 'other' teachers participated in the second group. The 'other' teachers taught classes such as physical education, computer sciences, music, or arts. Home-room teachers completed both questionnaires. Principals of all schools participated in the second 'other' teacher group.

Design

The evaluation design was based on the Key Features Model of Renzulli (Renzulli, 1975). Four key features emerged from the synthesis of data gathered in an evaluability study (Rossi & Freeman, 1993; Smith, 1989; Wholey, 1977) conducted as the front end analysis: school climate, self image of the student, use of skills, and the social validity of the program. These features served as the basis upon which change was measured.

The fourth key feature, social validity, merits further clarification in order to understand its inclusion in the study. Social validity can be defined as consumer satisfaction with a social program (Khattri, 1991). The rationale for evaluating the social validity of a program is linked with the need to examine reasons as to why participants use or do not use program content. Social validity is concerned with three aspects of interventions: (a) are the goals important to the participants?, (b) are the consumers satisfied with the procedures of the program?, and (c) are the consumers satisfied with the outcomes, including unintended outcomes? Social validity is based on the belief that participants who value and like a program are more likely to use the program knowledge and skills which the program promotes.

Data collection procedures used a quasi-experimental pre-post test control group design. In order to control for threats to the validity for such effects as maturation, three classrooms were included as the control group in the design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). In selecting the control

group, it was necessary to establish comparability for age, sex, race, socioeconomic, academic level, and school discipline records. As recommended by Lam (1989), the control group was selected in other schools to avoid interference.

Data Sources

The sources of data included (a) a questionnaire completed by students pre- and post-program, (b) a questionnaire completed by the home room teacher on each student pre- and post-program, (c) a questionnaire completed pre- and post-program by all teachers with any teaching responsibility for the participating classrooms, (d) structured interviews with teachers pre- and post- program, and (e) structured observations of students pre- and post- program.

The measurement instruments employed in the evaluation addressed recommendations made in the literature for multiple measures of effects and also addressed the deficits found in other studies (Cohen, 1989; Lam, 1989; Wilson-Brewer et al., 1991). The instruments were designed to systematically gather data. For example, interviews responses and observations collected in this fashion became data not anecdotes.

All instruments were examined for content validity by seven professional colleagues, the content experts, a group of students of similar age and background to the experimental group, and finally a professional for final editing. Pilot interviews and observations were conducted with students and teachers using respective questionnaires.

The collection of data with multiple instruments from several sources permitted quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Between methods triangulation (Smith & Kleine, 1986) enabled the use of strong points from each type of data, cross checking of data, and collection of information that was only available through particular techniques. Statistical significance found for

features was supported with evidence from interviews and structured observations increased in validity.

Coding Procedures

The four key features which served as the basis for the design and subsequent measurements also were the basis of the coding procedures used in analysis. For example, questionnaires completed by students and teachers sought responses regarding the key feature 'use of skills'. Students were asked to identify the "ways they dealt with arguments with peers". Teachers were asked to describe the ways each student typically dealt with conflict. 'Other' teachers were asked to describe methods students used in conflicts with peers. Observations were structured to collect frequencies of the various ways students used in conflicts with peers in the classrooms, and during recreation periods. Interviews were structured to solicited the same information. Data from all three questionnaires, the interviews, and the observations were coded in three categories: negative, positive, or specific to conflict resolution skills. Inter-rater reliability checks on coding were conducted. Frequency counts within the coded categories were then used in matched t-tests.

As a second example, the key feature of school climate was examined by asking students whether conflict was a problem for them in school and asking them to describe the "climate". Teachers were asked the same question. Interviews also were structured to obtain teachers descriptions of the class and school climate. Observations required that the climate be described in low inference behaviors for each observation. Data was coded into two categories, (a) negative, when terms such as tense, stressed, aggressive, volatile, or disruptive were used in descriptions, and (b) positive when terms such as cooperative accommodating and positive were identified. Frequency counts were analyzed using t-tests. All classrooms, in experimental and control groups

were compared pre and post program. Further triangulation was accomplished for each key feature by using several questions.

Program Comparison

The methods used to conduct the comparison of the conflict resolution program to other violence prevention initiatives involved a literature review and document analysis. Alternative programs were researched in order to reveal the various perspectives, benefits, and limitations rather than identify a 'right way'. The goals, content, and instructional strategies were identified and categorized to highlight the similarities and the differences. Findings arranged in dimensions and continuums would serve to educate the decision-makers about characteristics of the programs. On the basis of this comparison decision-makers would be better equipped with information to assist in determining the future of the project under evaluation.

Characteristics of the Conflict Resolution Program

The project that was being evaluated is delivered over ten consecutive weeks with a follow-up class on the twelfth week (i.e. following a two week gap). The final class period is used for evaluation and for facilitating transfer of skills. The content topics included in the program are:

(a) the nature of conflict

(b) accepting and respecting difference; awareness of ourselves and others

(c) finding ourselves in conflict: conflict styles

(d) skills for effective communication

(e) taking control of ourselves: understanding feelings in conflict

(f) Resolving conflict

The project employs one animator who delivers the program. The animator is responsible to the prevention committee and must work cooperatively with the teachers and the school. The animator must possess the skills to organize schedules to fit within four schools, to work in a multicultural setting, and in two languages. Teachers remain in the classrooms as resource persons and assist in managing the class. Teachers retain accountability for the class and students.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study are presented in relationship to the key features used as measures of change.

School Climate: Conflict in the Schools

Students and teachers agreed that the occurrence of fights, arguments, and conflict was a problem. This agreement was consistent for schools in the program and control groups and in pre- and post-tests. No significance was found in statistical analysis of responses to questions about perceived problems. In pre-tests, 93% of the program group and 91% of the control group identified that they had to deal with fights and arguments (see Table 1). Post-tests revealed this concern remained about the same. While the program group response dropped to 85%, this decrease was not found to be a significant reduction and indeed continued to indicate a very high level of concern. Teachers also agreed that conflict was a problem for students in their schools (88% pre and 89% post).

Students in all schools agreed with the statement that youth violence was a problem in their schools or neighborhoods (Table 1). This belief about the extent of the problem increased

Table 1.

Student perceptions of conflict, (N=140)

	Pre-test		Post-test	
Variable	Control	Program	Control	Program
Must deal with fights, conflict	91%	93%	92%	85%
Youth violence in school, neighborhood	71%	66%	75%	72%

significantly for students in post-program tests of both the control and program groups, $t(138) = 2.295$, $p < .023$. This suggests that the concern about youth violence could be a daily and escalating concern for these students.

The reported extent of problem arising from conflict was supported by teacher ratings of the level of conflict and aggression (see Table 2), by observations of students behavior in and out of the classroom, and by interview responses of teachers and students. Fifty-seven percent of teachers in pre-program questionnaires rated the level of conflict and aggression as high on a three point scale. Only 7% rated the class conflict as low. Fifty percent of teachers indicated that conflict in the class interfered with teaching time everyday with 71% occurring in the range of 1-4 times during a typical class.

Prior to the program, the climate of this class was described by teachers in terms such as tense, stressed, aggressive, volatile, or disruptive (75%) (see Table 3). A third of the classrooms (29%) felt this climate was getting worse or unchanged (42%). Following the program, terms such as cooperative, accommodating, or positive increased in post-tests of the program schools

(25%-42%). Teachers involved in the program group post-tests more frequently described the classroom climate as improving (29%-61%). While program participants responded more optimistically, control group participants remained unchanged and continued to describe their classrooms in negative terms.

Table 2

Teacher perception of conflict, (N=30)

		Pre		Post	
Variable		Control	Program	Control	Program
Conflict is a problem for students		85%	88%	88%	89%
Level of conflict for this class	High	58%	57%	66%	22%
	Average	33%	36%	33%	44%
	Low	9%	7%	0	34%
Interferes with teaching	Every day	58%	50%	50%	17%
	Every week	33%	29%	42%	33%
	Every month	9%	14%	8%	39%
	Never	0	7%	0	11%
Frequency of conflict	5+/class	8%	7%	8%	6%
	1-4/class	58%	64%	66%	39%
	weekly	25%	21%	25%	33%
	monthly	8%	8%	0	22%

Observations of school classrooms and interviews with teachers following the program supported the questionnaire results that school climate had shown improvement. Classrooms were described as more respectful of others, with more listening occurring, and students taking greater responsibility for their behavior. One teacher spoke with appreciation of the occasions when students solved their own problems and the class was "even peaceful".

Table 3

Descriptions of Classroom Climate

Descriptions	Pre		Post	
	Control	Program	Control	Program
Negative terms	75%	74%	75%	58%
Positive terms	25%	26%	25%	42%
Improving	25%	29%	33%	61%
Getting worse	33%	29%	33%	0
Consistent	33%	42%	33%	33%
Impossible	9%	0	0	6%

Student Self-image

Students chose responses in the questionnaires demonstrated behaviors in the classroom, and made statements in the interviews which indicated lack of confidence, low self esteem, and anger. In pre-program data collection students chose aggressive reactions to conflicts and difficult situations with friends and family. Hitting, fighting, making faces, shouting, and cursing were

common responses. Thirty-three percent of student responses were coded as negative. Many students reported feeling victimized, threatened, trapped, and ignored. Their reactions to these situations were to cry, react by lying, fight back, or isolate themselves respectively. Ten percent of students revealed that they did not tell anyone including their parents how they felt or what they thought. Interviews suggested students believed no one cared, understood, or would listen. Taking "an Advil" was an acceptable coping mechanism when difficulties were encountered.

In pre-program questionnaires, 24% students rated their ability to deal with conflict as 'bad' and 18% rated it as "OK" or "good". In post-test questionnaires, student's self ratings of their confidence improved. Fifty-eight percent of students rated their ability as OK, good, or very well. Only 3% of students rated their ability as "bad". This increase in confidence was reflected in prosocial responses reported by students in post-program data. Students reported that they were communicating their thoughts and feelings to friends and family in conflict situations. Observations of students in the classroom and during recreation periods supported what was being reported attempts. Teachers also reported an increase in prosocial behavior and confidence.

Use of Conflict Resolution Skills

In all of the experimental classrooms, students showed a significant increase in the use of skills specific to conflict resolution. Students responses showed significant increase in use of conflict resolution and prosocial skills with peers, t (79) = 4.501, $p < .001$ and with parents, t (79) = 5.514, $p < .001$. Teachers also reported a significant increase from their perspective, t (15) = 3.529, $p < .003$. Interviews with teachers supported this finding. "I hear the words as they [students] try to solve their own disagreements. The most important thing is that they are aware, ...aware of their options now".

Social Validity

According to the students, perceived usefulness and appreciation of the conflict resolution skill training increased from 59% in pre-tests to 89% in post-tests. Students enjoyment of the procedures and instruction increased from 66% to 85%, $t(79) = 3.938$, $p < .001$. In post program interviews students reported wanting to continue in a similar program and stated that they had recognized changes in themselves from the beginning of the program.

The same appreciation was not found with the teachers. Despite consistent teacher reports of an improved class climate and a decrease in interference with teaching, the perceived value of the program by teachers was unchanged from pre- to post-program conditions (see table 4).

Table 4.

Teacher Reports of Social Validity of the Conflict Resolution Program.

Response	Frequency	
	Pre	Post
Useful	50%	56%
Not useful	6%	6%
Undecided	44%	39%

This response to the value of the program may be the result of several factors. First, only four of the eighteen teachers were in the class while the program was delivered. Second, during the interviews, many teachers said they thought the length of time was inadequate to "make a difference". Third, immersed in the setting each day, teachers may be unable to see a response to a twelve week program. Fourth, several teachers reported seeing "things (programs, services) come

and go" and "nothing helps us", many just adding to the work. Seventy-five percent of teachers indicated that the conflict among students was a problem for them as teachers. Fights, disruptive behavior, and conflicts all interfere with their "job". In the interviews, they reported feeling frustrated, tired, and sometimes "angry (them)selves".

Program Comparison

The evaluation served to meet the committee's needs in six ways. First, they gained better insight as to the effectiveness of the program. The evidence of these effects supported their efforts to initiate conflict resolution programs for future years and classrooms. The evidence also provided data to convince others of the programs merit. Second, the comparison of the program with other programs educated the committee and other allied parties about the types of violence programs being offered elsewhere, the extent of youth and school violence in schools in their community and across the country, and their part in a multisystem approach to violence prevention. Third, the evaluation outlined the alternatives for future program expansion and improvement. The identification of areas for possible integration with other agencies, services, and systems were seen as valuable. The committee spent considerable effort determining its position on the various dimension that could be adopted (see Table 5). Fourth, resources were identified to assist the animators, the committee, and the community develop prevention measures. Connections and networks were developed with other agencies, and federal and international educational and research organizations. For example research done by the Solicitor Generals Office in Ottawa provided needed information of other studies and Canadian statistics [Day, 1995 #87][Gabor, 1995 #170] and the National Association of Mediation in Education (N.A.M.E.) in Washington offers many types of educational resources. This lessens the isolation

Table 5.

Dimensions of Programs & Policies for Violence Prevention Programs

	Programs & Policies	
Reactive	←----------→	Proactive
	Target	
Few aggressive	←----------→	All & staff
Older adolescents	←----------→	Younger
	Outcome	
Single focused	←----------→	Wide range
Decrease in aggressive behavior	←----------→	Increase in prosocial behavior

felt by organizations as they deal with complex social issues such as violence. Fifth, marketing tools were developed for the committee. A brochure, an evaluation report in three forms, and audiovisual material assisted the committee to speak to others about the project. Finally, the evaluation assisted in securing funding from one federal source. While funding is often a major concern for such programs, the committee now reports feeling better equipped to address this task.

Conclusions

The major implications as a result of this study for future evaluations of violence prevention programs include;

- Equipping our communities with the knowledge, resources, and confidence to tackle important social issues such as violence prevention is possible. Researchers and

evaluators should consider a broader role for themselves, one which can support decision-makers beyond conducting studies.

- It is challenging to establish the effectiveness of programs that are preventative in nature. How does one measure a reduction of something that did not occur? Nonetheless, it can be done. Creative and skillful evaluations can provide valid and reliable data on program effectiveness.
- Teachers are essential to the success of violence prevention initiatives and they need to be supported in their role in educating our youth. Integrating teachers in violence prevention programs is important in the transfer and consolidation of the skills and knowledge.
- Complex activities are needed to address the complexity and multifaceted nature of violence in our society. This can be attained in integrating programs. Integration must occur at many points. First, conflict resolution programs need to be integrated into the school academic and social life. Add-on programs are limited by the perception of marginal status compared to the core programs. Second, principles and skills underlying conflict resolution could be integrated in the curriculum. Current research is paving the way for this to happen (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1996). Finally, conflict resolution must be integrated and supported along with other violence prevention initiatives throughout the school and greater community and country.

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